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Introducing your cat to other pets

Bringing a new cat or kitten into your home and introducing them to your resident cat or dog can be quite nerve-racking. You want them all to get on together and to welcome the new feline into the house. Careful, controlled introductions will give a much better chance of a smooth encounter and provide the best possible start together.

Introducing cats to cats

Remember that cats do not need to be social creatures – unlike pack-orientated dogs they can be happy without a social structure. They are unlikely to feel the need for a companion even though you wish to have another cat around. You cannot force cats to like each other – some live with a newcomer easily, but others never get on or only manage to live together in an uneasy truce. However, if there is no competition for food or safe sleeping places, most cats accept each other and some even form close bonds.

How you introduce a new cat or kitten into your home, and to a resident cat or cats can, however, make a difference. Once a relationship becomes violent or fearful and the cat feels threatened, it is difficult to change behaviour patterns. Taking things slowly with careful introductions is vital to prevent excessive reactions.

Adults or kittens?

A kitten is less of a threat to a resident cat than an adult cat because the animal is still sexually immature. Neutering helps remove some problems but may not eliminate them. If introducing an adult cat, it can be better to bring in one of the opposite sex.

Timing

Choose a quiet time when the household is calm – avoid festivities, parties, visiting relatives or friends, and find time to concentrate on calm reassurance for both cats.



Smell

Smell is important. Scent is the most important of the cat's senses for communication. You can integrate the new cat into your home better by ensuring that the new pet smells of "home" before being introduced to the resident cat. To do this, stroke each cat without washing your hands to mix scents. Also gather scents from the new cat's head by gently stroking with a soft cloth and dabbing this around your home and furniture to mix and spread the scents. Likewise, letting the new cat get used to new smells of the house, and another cat, before the initial meeting can make it more tolerable. For this reason, it is useful to delay the cats from meeting for a few days or even a week. During this time, keep them in separate rooms, but allow each cat to investigate the other's room and bed without actually meeting.

Introductions

Use a pen or carrier for introductions. It is up to you to make both the new cat and the resident feel as secure as possible and prevent the newcomer from being chased or threatened (or, occasionally, the other way around). Problems can arise if initial meetings are allowed to deteriorate into a fight or chase. The best way to avoid this is to use a kittening pen or crate for initial introductions. These are metal mesh pens with a door, which can be left open or shut securely. The cat inside can see what is going on but feels safe inside the "den". Put a blanket over the top initially for more security if you think the cat feels vulnerable – but allow for viewing out of one side at least. The pen allows the cats to see each other, sniff through the bars and have a hiss and moan at each other without any attack or intimidation. The bars allow them to be close together but provide protection at the same time.

If you have a new kitten, then it is useful to use the larger pen as a base for the kitten to be kept in initially. Introductions can be made using the pen and you can shut the kitten in with a bed and litter tray if you are going out and do not want the young pet to get into mischief or danger. The kitten can be shut in the pen at night (ensure that water is available) with the other animals in the same room and they can get used to each other in safety.

If you cannot get hold of a pen or crate, then use a cat carrier or basket for initial introductions. Of course you will not be able to use it as a den to shut the cat or kitten in for long periods because it is too small, but it is better than nothing.

How to use a carrier or pen for introductions: Place the new cat or kitten in the pen/ carrier and let the resident cat come into the room. If using a cat carrier, place it above ground level so the cats are not forced into direct eye contact with each other (which can cause aggression). Let the resident cat come into the room and give the cat attention and calm reassurance. If the cat decides to run away without investigating the new cat, do not force a meeting but accept that things may take a little time. This is probably the type of cat that does not initiate meetings but stays out of the way and gradually accepts a newcomer into the household over time. If the cats do show signs of aggression, distract them with a noise and then praise them for quiet encounters. You can use titbits to encourage the cats to stay near each other, accept the other's presence, and make it a positive experience – you want the cats to associate each other with pleasant experiences, not shouting or chasing.

If using a large pen, then allow the resident cat free access over a number of days at times when the kitten/cat is in the pen so they gradually get used to each other. If using a carrier then you need to be little more proactive and orchestrate frequent meetings. With both methods you can start to feed the cats at the same time, the resident outside and the new cat inside the pen or carrier on the floor. Throughout this process there may be some hissing and spitting but this should gradually change into curiosity and gradual acceptance – it may take several days or weeks, depending on the individual cats.

Face-to-face meeting

When the time is right to let them meet without the pen, use food as a distraction. Withhold food so they are somewhat hungry and then feed them in the same room. Choose a room where either cat can escape behind furniture, jump up high, or hide if necessary. Put down the resident cat's food and then let the new cat out of the basket to eat – but judge how close they can be and do not attempt side-by-side feeding initially!

Be calm and reassuring, and reward the behaviour you want with praise and titbits of a favourite food. Gauge how the cats are getting on – they may find their own spots and curl up for a sleep or you may need to keep the new one separate again for a little longer, using meals as a time for them to get together.

Once you are sure they are not going to fight or chase, then start to use the whole house – the cats will probably find places to sleep and routines which allow them to live peacefully in the same house and partake of all the benefits of food, warmth and attention while gradually becoming used to and accepting one another.

How long will it take?

It may only take a day or two, or it may take several weeks for cats to tolerate each other. It may take months before the cats are relaxed with one another, but you are on your way to success if you reach the stage of a calm truce between them.

Introducing a dog

Although dogs and cats are often portrayed as enemies, it is usually easier to introduce a new cat to a dog than to another cat. While both animals may be wary of each other initially, they can actually get on very well. If your dog is used to cats, there may be initial excitement at having a new one in the house but that soon settles down as the novelty wears off quickly. Although your dog will live happily with your cats, strange cats may still be chased out of the garden, so take care until the cat is seen as one of the household. Likewise if your new cat or kitten has previously lived with a dog, the cat will be likely to be confident around the dog more quickly. However, initially safety must come first. Keep everything under control until the dog and cat have got used to one another. Stroke the dog and cat separately but without washing your hands to exchange their scents. The cat will then take on the smell of the home and become part of the dog's pack. Once again, the large pen is ideal for first meetings to keep the situation calm and the cat protected. Let the dog sniff the newcomer through the bars and get over the initial excitement. The cat may hiss and spit but he is well protected. Some dogs, especially those not used to cats or of an excitable disposition, need extra care for introductions. They should be kept as calm as possible on the lead and made to sit quietly. The new cat should be given a safe position in the room, be allowed to get used to the dog, and approach only if the dog wants. This may take quite some time and requires patience. Reward the dog for behaving well.

For quieter dogs or those used to cats, introductions can be made using a strong cat carrier. Keep the dog on a lead initially, place the carrier on a high surface and allow controlled introductions that are short and frequent. Most dogs will soon calm down when they realise the newcomer is not actually interesting. Progress to meetings with the dog on a lead initially, for safety. If your dog is rather excitable then take him for a vigorous walk first to get rid of some energy!

Breeds such as terriers or those that like to chase, such as greyhounds, may need to be kept well under control until they have learned that the cat is not to be chased. Young pups are likely to get

very excited and may try to play with the new cat, which is unlikely to want to join in! Stay calm and be aware that a sudden dash from the cat will induce a chase. Praise the dog for calm interactions, and use food treats to reward the dog for good behaviour. Again, associate the presence of the cat with reward for calm behaviour. When you progress to access without the lead, make sure there are places where the cat can escape to – high ledges or furniture the cat can use to feel safe. Never leave the dog and cat together unattended until you are happy that they are safe together.

The cat's food will be hugely tempting for any dog, so site it up and out of the way of your dog. Likewise a litter tray can be pretty tempting and should be kept out of the dog's reach.